

Sick river *on a* slow road *to* recovery

Tennessee River's health not much better than 5 years ago, but it's improving

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Five years after a *Huntsville Times* investigation used one word – “sick” – to sum up the Tennessee River, it's still too early to call the patient recovered.

Evidence does suggest several major pollution sources – an old DDT plant on Redstone Arsenal and a paper plant in Courtland, among others – are no longer threats.

Established watchdogs like the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Alabama Department of Environmental Management and the Alabama Rivers Alliance are still on the job. And they've now been joined by new citizens groups such as Alabama Water Watch. “Not banner-carrying

Please see SICK on A6



Ellen Hudson/Huntsville Times

Danny Dunn, left, and Clyde Foster, members of the DDT clean-up review panel, stand at a cleanup site on Redstone Arsenal.

Groups watch river... and budget

By **CHALLENGE STEPHENS**
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Lake sturgeon can grow up to 300 pounds. That's eight feet of shiny, black scales gliding through the Tennessee River basin.

Five years ago, when *The Huntsville Times* published a lengthy report on the health of the Tennessee River, there were few sturgeon to be found. At the time, the Tennessee Valley Authority was the chief environmental steward of the river. That hasn't changed; these remain TVA waters, although TVA no longer gets federal money for envi-

River bacteria

Tests conducted for *The Times* found high levels of bacteria in several parts of the Tennessee River. Bacteria comes from many sources, and many types are not harmful to humans. But high levels do indicate the possibility that more dangerous forms such as *E. coli*, fecal and strep bacteria may be present. Bacteria counts are typically much higher in warm weather.



UAH graduate student Shalana Brown, left, Dr. Joe Mastrominico, and Dr. Kate Leonard, right, are testing water samples for bacteria.

Total bacteria count per 1/2 cup water.

■ Sampled on Aug. 24, 2002

■ Sampled on Aug. 19 - Sept. 1997

■ Sampled on Oct. 18, 1997

Flint River at Hobbs Island Road crossing

■ 31,200

■ 2,500

Tennessee River one mile above Ditto Landing

■ 6,000

■ 1,250

Ditto Landing 75 yards from opening to Tennessee River

■ 45,600

■ 1,200

■ 1,100,000

Tennessee River below Ditto Landing before Aldridge Creek

■ 4,800

■ 750

Aldridge Creek 300 yards from entrance to Tennessee River

■ 3,600

■ 600

Tennessee River 200 yards below Aldridge Creek entrance

■ 4,440

■ 4,000

Aldridge Creek at Mountain Gap Road crossing

■ 67,200

■ 2,700

Spring Branch at Airport Road crossing

■ 74,400

■ 1,200

Indian Creek at opening to Tennessee River

■ 6,000

■ 3,000

Guntersville Lake

■ 14,400

■ 62,000

Riverwalk Marina Decatur

■ 1,400,000

Source: University of Alabama in Huntsville

Dulcie Teesateskie/Huntsville Times

More environmental groups, volunteers are focused on health of Tennessee River

Watch

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environmental programs.

And according to most watchdogs, more environmental groups and volunteers are focused on the health of the Tennessee River than were watching five years ago.

That includes the World Wildlife Fund, which opened an office in Nashville three years ago. This is the group's fifth U.S. office. Now the same group that won renown fighting for pandas and tigers has helped reintroduce the lake sturgeon.

"We're trying to get to the point where we're protecting species before they become endangered," said Wendy Smith of the World Wildlife Fund.

Her group joins a growing list of river monitors surrounding the Tennessee. These include maturing environmental groups. The Alabama Rivers Alliance, a one-man operation in 1995, now has a lobbying presence in the state Legislature. Over the last seven years, the Alabama Water Watch Association developed into a support network for local volunteers.

Smaller volunteer groups, such as the Flint River Conservation Association, continue to pop up throughout Alabama and Tennessee. The volunteers monitor local tributaries and spread the word about environmental concerns, such as soil erosion and runoff pollution.

Alabama's official monitor of water quality, the Alabama Department of Environmental Management, has also recently begun enforcing more strict erosion laws to counteract sprawl.

But according to most river watchers, while the attention and concern has grown, the money to act has not.

ADEM employees say they still watch for budget cuts in Montgomery.

And some environmental groups fear a backslide from

TVA, whose federal environmental money for the river ended in 1999. Now TVA does environmental work with profits from the sale of electricity.

Dr. Stephen Smith, executive director of the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy in Knoxville, said TVA eventually could trim environmental programs to save money. The power distributors, who buy electricity from TVA, watch the bottom line, he said.

"Which I think is a very bad precedent for the management of the Tennessee River," Smith said. Power distributors "don't have a real appreciation for the finer, less economically driven features of managing an aquatic system."

No major cuts

However, TVA said the environmental programs have seen no major cuts since 1999.

"When our funding changed, I think there was some concern we would cut back," said Sue Robertson, who manages water programs out of Chattanooga for TVA. "In fact, we increased our monitoring over time."

Founded by Congress in 1933, TVA doesn't enforce pollution controls or post warnings. That's up to individual state agencies.

Instead, TVA is, among many things, a power company, a water quality assessor for the state and a private marketer of new environmental technologies. It's also the river's first-on-the-scene pollution scout. TVA locates environmental problems and, when possible, fixes them.

Most groups, from ADEM to the Alabama Rivers Alliance, refer to TVA as an environmental partner and information resource.

That's because TVA collects and shares data on the quality of the region's drinking water and the health of more than 225 species of fish in the Tennessee.

To that end, TVA joined several other groups to reintroduce thousands of sturgeon into

the French Broad Creek in Tennessee two years ago, said Smith of the World Wildlife Fund.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service brought the species from Wisconsin. The Tennessee Aquarium hatched the eggs. Other concerned groups, such as the U.S. Geological Survey and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, were involved.

Sturgeon sighted

Recently, sturgeon have been sighted in the Tennessee River near Knoxville, Smith said.

Such large-scale collaboration among private and government groups is still rare. Often volunteers are left to clean up tributaries such as the Flint River in Madison County, collecting debris from canoes.

"I haven't seen any evidence that it's getting cleaner," said Ben Ferrill, a volunteer with the Flint River Conservation Association, which holds an annual cleanup.

Problem is soil erosion

However, the main problem with the Flint isn't litter, he said. It is soil erosion. New development disturbs the earth. When it rains, loose soil flows into streams. The excess sediment is choking the Flint, Ferrill said. Fish and mussels are threatened.

The Flint River Conservation Association is working to secure a federal grant to combat some erosion problems, as well as other pollution concerns, including runoff from cattle farms, Ferrill said.

But this is where a pollution problem grows beyond the scope of a volunteer group. The Conservation Association holds an annual festival to educate homeowners and neighbors about the river. But only the state can require remedies.

Even on the Tennessee, TVA does not fine polluters. In Alabama, ADEM does.

Beginning in March, builders working on construction sites as small as an acre must get a permit from ADEM that as-

ures they took steps to mize soil erosion. Worker have to build sediment ponds to catch the runoff, mulch to shield the g erect silt fences or line age channels.

"It's a tremendous ch said Steve Jenkins, ch field operations for A "We're getting down t mom-and-pop level."

A permit costs \$175 a for less than five acres. It \$1,025 for more than 100. Jenkins said the new r problems, rather than fin luters afterward.

Jenkins also said A more than doubled its based in Decatur as a res the loss of federal fundin TVA's environmental grams.

"Water quality in gener the Tennessee Valley, pro hasn't changed significantl the last five years, said J. McIndoo, head of the wate vision of ADEM.

But Jenkins said more ple are monitoring water q ty than 10 years ago.

Brad McLane, executiv rector of Alabama Rivers ance, said his group fill void in recent years, pus for state standards for w quality and encouraging v teer watershed groups.

McLane said he's seen mendment change" in the few years. "People are n engaged; they know more. dia write about the is more."

And ADEM feels the p sure of what McLane ca grass-roots water advocates

"They know we're out the he said."

That wasn't necessarily case five years ago.

On the Net:
ADEM: www.adem.state.al.us
Alabama Rivers Alliance:
www.alabamarivers.org
Alabama Water Watch Association:
www.albamawaterwatch.org
Southern Alliance for Clean Energy:
www.cleanenergy.org
TVA: www.tva.gov
World Wildlife Fund: www.worldlife.org